

## Telling Someone to Bite Their Father's Genitals: Explicit Phrase or Misunderstood Expression?

Waqar Akbar Cheema

### **Abstract**

When dealing with any Islamic text in English, it is absolutely crucial to use the most accurate Arabic translation, in order to reflect the true intended meaning of the text. Not only is an incorrect translation completely irresponsible and misleading, but it actually removes the implication of the original statement by misquoting the one who said it. Using such types of translations makes it very easy for a person to prove their point, regardless of what the truth is. This article will bring forth one such commonly mistranslated and misunderstood hadith, and provide it with a better translation and its proper significance. This will further be supplemented by other narrations that use the same words and are more explicit in their meaning.

### **1. Introduction**

Knowing that their claims about the essentials and generalities of Islam are proven to be false, some critics of Islam pick on isolated narrations, translating them as they like to make the average person feel uneasy about Islam.

One such narration appears as:

*Ubayy b. Ka'b told that he heard God's messenger say, "If anyone proudly asserts his descent in the manner of the pre-Islamic people, tell him to bite his father's penis, and do not use a euphemism."*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robson, James, *Mishkat al-Masabih - English Translation with Explanatory Notes*, Vol. 2, 1021

### **2. Actual wording and literal analysis**

The actual words of the Prophet are:

من تعزى بعزاء الجاهلية فأعضوه بمن أبيه ولا تكنوا

Its literal translation would be:

**“He who so asserts his relationship in the manner of the time of ignorance, make him bite the membrum of his father and make no allusion.”**<sup>2</sup>

Three words here need special attention. We shall show their original denotative and connotative meanings, and in the light of that, make a lucid and truly justified translation.

- a) *عض (adh)* literally means “to bite” but often implies to “stick to.”
- b) *هن (han)* originally means a thing but often it is used to refer to the genitals.
- c) *كنى (kuna)* literally means metonymy and is used for any kind of indirect speech.

#### **2.1 Meaning of the word *عض (adh)***

Literally *عض (adh)* means “to bite;” however it implies to “stick to.” The following is an example to show the “stick to” connotation of this word.

<sup>2</sup> This hadith is recorded in many hadith works including *Musnad Ahmad*, *Sunan al-Kubra* of an-Nasa'i and *Mushkil al-Athar* of at-Tahawi. It is also quoted in Shia sources; see for instance: al-Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol.32, 91. Al-Majlisi also quotes another narration attributed to 'Ali with a similar wording.

The Messenger of Allah said:

فعلَيْكُمْ بسنتي وسنة الخلفاء الراشدين المهديين تمسكوا بها وعضوا عليها بالنواجذ

Dr. James Robson, whose translation the missionaries use for the hadith in question, translates this one as:

**“You must therefore follow my *sunna* and that of the rightly guided Caliphs. Hold to it and stick fast to it (*adhdu alaiha binawajiz*).”**<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, he adds a note to the last phrase of the part of hadith quotes here;

**“Lit. ‘bite on it with the molar teeth.’”**<sup>4</sup>

Where the actual wording says “bite *with teeth*” Dr. Robson gives the implied meaning and where it simply says “bite,” he somehow feels compelled to go for a literal rendering.

It is thus clear that word *عض* (*adh*) is not always understood literally and often<sup>5</sup> implies to “stick to.”

## 2.2 Meaning of *هن* (*han*)

Literally the word *هن* (*han*) means “a thing.”<sup>6</sup> And by the way of euphemism it is used for the male (or female) organ.

Ibn al-Athir al-Jazari (d. 606 AH) defines it:

كناية عن الشيء لا تذكره باسمه

**“It is a metonymy for anything which is not mentioned by name.”**<sup>7</sup>

Abul-‘Abbas al-Fayyumi (d. 770 AH) says:

وكني بهذا الاسم عن الفرج

<sup>3</sup> Robson, James, *Mishkat al-Masabih - English Translation with Explanatory Notes*, Vol.1, 44

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> There are more examples in Hadith literature but we leave them for the sake of brevity.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, E. W., *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Vol.8, 3045

<sup>7</sup> al-Jazari, Ibn al-Atheer, *al-Nihayah fee Ghareeb al-Hadith*, Vol.5, 278

**“And this word is used as a euphemism for the genitals.”**<sup>8</sup>

Evidently, the word used is not the proper explicit word for the male genital; rather it is a euphemism for it. For this reason, the rightful translation of it is “membrum” and not the word used by Dr. Robson.

Membrum is a euphemism<sup>9</sup> for the word “penis”<sup>10</sup> and therefore the appropriate word here. Prof. Josef Horovitz correctly used it in his English rendering of this hadith while translating Ibn Qutayba’s ‘Uyun al-Akhbar.<sup>11</sup>

This is no trivial a difference. In fact, it governs the central-most idea - failing to understand it or twisting the entire saying is ill-conceived.

## 2.3 Meaning of *كنى* (*kuna*)

Towards the end of the hadith, it is said “and make no allusion” (ولا تكنوا). To understand this correctly, one needs to consider the above explanation of the word *هن* (*han*).

When *هن* (*han*) itself is a euphemism, what does the last part of the hadith refer to it? We see these missionaries use the translation that fails to keep the euphemistic meanings of the original word and then they stress on the subsequent words “and do not use a euphemism” to suggest that the hadith asks for making an explicit mention of genitals. This is where the true meanings of the hadith are lost. In reality, it is about bluntly speaking about the disbelief and evil acts of one’s forefathers and that in doing so one should not stop with simply alluding to it because this will not bring about the forceful reproof.

## 3. Context of the saying

<sup>8</sup> al-Fayyumi, Abul-‘Abbas, *al-Misbah al-Muneer*, Vol.2, 641

<sup>9</sup> Flury, Peter (Munich), “[Euphemism](#)”

<sup>10</sup> Wikitionary, “[Membrum](#)”

<sup>11</sup> Horovitz, Josef, “‘Uyun al-Akhbar,” *Islamic Culture, The Hyderabad Quarterly Review*, Vol.4, 176

To have a profound understanding of the hadith, we need to see its context.

Firstly, even in *Mishkat* the hadith is placed in the chapter “Boasting and Party-Spirit.” Likewise, it is placed in similar chapters in *Sunan al-Kubra*<sup>12</sup> of an-Nasa’i, *Sharh as-Sunnah*<sup>13</sup> of al-Baghawi and *‘Amal al-Yawm wa al-Laylah*<sup>14</sup> of Ibn as-Sani.

It is well known that Islam does not tolerate any ideas that can undermine the universal Islamic brotherhood and for this reason, party-spirit, tribalism or narrow-nationalism is severely condemned. This was stressed more for the first recipients of the Prophet’s message because their ancestors were idolaters and their training was pivotal in setting up the new faith based on universal Islamic nationalism and brotherhood. The following hadith tells us the same:

عن أبي هريرة، قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم، إن الله عز وجل قد أذهب عنكم عبية الجاهلية، وفخرها بالآباء مؤمن تقي، وفاجر شقي، أنتم بنو آدم وآدم من تراب، ليدعن رجال فخرهم بأقوام، إنما هم فحم من فحم جهنم، أو ليكونن أهون على الله من الجعلان التي تدفع بأنفها التين

It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah said: “The Messenger of Allah said: **Allah has taken away your pride of *Jahiliyyah* and your boasting about your forefathers. One is only a righteous believer or a doomed evildoer. You are the sons of Adam and Adam was created from dust. Men should stop boasting about their forefathers, who are no more than the coal of Hell, or they will certainly be more insignificant before Allah than the beetle that rolls dung with its nose.**”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> an-Nasa’i, *Sunan al-Kubra*, Vol.9, 357-358

<sup>13</sup> al-Baghawi, *Sharh as-Sunnah*, Vol.13, 120

<sup>14</sup> Ibn as-Sani, *‘Amal al-Yawm wal-Laylah*, 384

<sup>15</sup> as-Sajistani, Abu Dawood, *as-Sunan*, Hadith 5116; al-Albani classified it as *hasan*

The hadith under discussion is also in the same backdrop as we shall explain shortly.

#### 4. Meanings of the phrase “make him bite the membrum of his father”

Knowing the context and understanding the key words puts us in a better position to understand the meaning of the phrase “make him bite his father’s membrum.” All this makes it clear that the hadith actually asks for putting to shame one who boasts for the condemned ideals by reminding him of humble origins and the disbelief and evildoings of his idolater ancestors.

Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) tells us the wisdom of mentioning the membrum:

وكان ذكر هن الأب هاهنا أحسن تذكيرا لهذا المتكبر بدعوى الجاهلية بالعضو الذي خرج منه

“The mention of father’s membrum here is a good reminder for the boastful, making the call of the ignorance through the organ from which he originated.”<sup>16</sup>

This can be related to the Qur’an:

هَلْ أَتَى عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ حِينٌ مِّنَ الدَّهْرِ لَمْ يَكُنْ شَيْئًا مَّذْكُورًا (٠) إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ نُّطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ نَّبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا

“Has there [not] come upon man a period of time when he was not a thing [even] mentioned? Indeed, We created man from a sperm-drop mixture that We may try him; and We made him hearing and seeing.”

(Qur’an 76:1-2)

Mulla Ali al-Qari (d. 1014 AH) explains it further:

من انتسب وانتمى إلى الجاهلية بإحياء سنة أهلها، وابتداع سنتهم في الشتم واللعن والتعير، ومواجهتهم بالفحشاء والتكبر، فاذكروا له قبائح أبيه من عبادة الأصنام والزنا وشرب الخمر، ونحو ذلك مما كان يعير به من لؤم ورذالة صريحا لا كناية؛ كي يرتدع عن التعرض لأعراض الناس

<sup>16</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zaad al-Ma’ad fee Hady Khayr al-‘Ibad*, Vol.2, 400

**“Whoever attributes and associates himself to the times of (pre-Islamic) ignorance in reviving their ways (by boasting for his forefathers), and in following their practices of abusing, cursing and reviling and comes to you with obscenity and arrogance, then mention to him the evildoings of his father - worshipping of idols, committing of adultery and taking of liquor and things like that. Put him to shame with the mention of all this as a reproof and humiliation and say it explicitly and not by just with euphemism; perhaps he will give up defiling the honor of the people.”**<sup>17</sup>

The underlined part is about the meaning of the last phrase in the hadith as discussed above.

### 5. More on the proverbial nature of the saying

Further proof of the proverbial nature of the saying is in the fact that in some versions of the hadith even the euphemism for the genitals is not used and the meaning is alluded to only through the initial word of the phrase.

إذا سمعتم من يعتزى بعزاء الجاهلية، فأعضوه، ولا تكنوا

**“When you here the one who asserts his relationship in the manners of the times of ignorance, then *make him bite* [the membrum of his father] and do not (just) make an allusion.”**<sup>18</sup>

Abu Ja'far at-Tahawi (d. 321 AH) makes special note of this version of the hadith.<sup>19</sup>

Also we see, when the successors of the Prophet followed this instruction, it became evident that the underlying message was to teach the one who makes the call of ignorance a lesson to break his party-spirit.

عن أبي مجلز ، قال : قال عمر : من اعتزى بالقبائل فأعضوه

Abu Mijliz mentions that ‘Umar said: **“Whoever associates himself with the tribes (in a way that undermines Islamic brotherhood), humble him! (lit. make him bite [his father’s membrum])”**<sup>20</sup>

And then”

عن أبي مجلز ، قال : قال رجل : يا آل بني تميم ، فحرمهم عمر بن الخطاب عطاءهم سنة

Abu Mijliz stated: **“A person called out, ‘O people of Banu Tamim,’ ‘Umar denied them their allowance for one year.”**<sup>21</sup>

The connection of the two narrations is obvious and we see ‘Umar did not do what he said literally; rather he suspended their privileges for a year as a reproof. By suspending their allowances he meant to tell them that their tribal affiliations were meaningless. And if they were not to give up the false pride they would be humbled through such punitive measures and their tribal affiliations will not suffice them. The act of humbling actually underscored the true meanings of the phrase under consideration.

The following narration from at-Tabari (d. 310 AH) in its essence supports what has been stated above:

لما انهزمت ميمنة العراق وأقبل علي نحو الميسرة، مر به الأشتر يركض نحو الفزع قبل الميمنة، فقال له علي: يا مالك، قال: ليبيك، قال: ائت هؤلاء القوم فقل لهم: أين فراركم من الموت الذي لن تعجزوه، إلى الحياة التي لن تبقى لكم! فمضى فاستقبل الناس منهزمين، فقال لهم هذه الكلمات التي قالها له علي [وقال: إلي أيها الناس، أنا مالك بن الحارث، أنا مالك بن الحارث، ثم ظن أنه بالأشتر أعرف في الناس، فقال: أنا الأشتر، إلي أيها الناس فأقبلت إليه طائفة، وذهبت عنه طائفة، فنادى: أيها الناس، عضضتم بهن آبائكم! ما أبيض ما قاتلتم منذ اليوم! أيها الناس، أخلصوا إلي مذحجا، فأقبلت إليه مذحج، فقال: عضضتم بصم

<sup>17</sup> al-Qari, Mulla Ali, *Mirqat al-Mafatih*, Vol.7, 3076

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad, *al-Musnad*, Hadith 21233

<sup>19</sup> at-Tahawi, Abu Ja'far, *Sharh Mushkil al-Athar*, Vol.8, 235

<sup>20</sup> Ibn Abi Shaybah, *al-Musannaf*, Hadith 38339

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, Hadith 38404

الجنادل! ما أرضيتكم ربكم، ولا نصحتم له في عدوكم، وكيف بذلك وأنتم أبناء الحروب

**When the right wing of the Iraqis was defeated and ‘Ali joined the left, al-Ashtar passed him galloping in the direction of the right wing towards the panic. ‘Ali said to him, “Malik,” and he answered, “Yes, here I am at your service.” ‘Ali said, “Go to those men and ask them why they are fleeing from death, whose power they cannot destroy, to life, which will not long remain for them?” Malik went on and met the men in their fight. He said to them what ‘Ali had told him to say and rallied them, saying, “To me, men! I am Malik b. al-Harith!” But then he thought that perhaps he was better known among them as al-Ashtar and he said, “I am al-Ashtar! To me, men!”**

**A group joined him, but a group deserted, and he cried out: “Men, how shameful you are! How wretched has been your fighting today! Men, sort out Madhhij, and send them to me.”**

**Madhhij joined him, and he said: “May you bite on hard rock! You have neither pleased your Lord nor been true to Him regarding your enemy. *How can that be when you are born warriors?*”<sup>22</sup>**

Here the original wording for the underlined phrase is the very one under consideration. Literally it would be translated as, “*Men, bite you the membrums of your fathers.*” The context is that people who came from tribes known for chivalry were showing their backs and behaving out of their expected tribal character. To such, Malik called with those words to remind them of their positive family attributes and shake them by putting them to

shame with these words. G.R. Hawting has thus rightfully rendered it as “*Men, how shameful you are!*”

This also shows that while the phrase is about asking one to reflect on his lineage, it is not necessarily to condemn the addressee’s forefathers; rather it is to condemn his behavior in relation to what is commended in Islam through a reference to his ancestors and their deeds.

In fact, evidence suggests, the phrase was at times used to express anger as such. Read the following account given by Ibn Katheer (d. 774 AH) about pre-Islamic times.

وذكر الكلبي: أن امرأ القيس أقبل برأياته يريد قتال بني أسد حين قتلوا أباه فمر بتبالة وبها ذو الخلصة وهو صنم وكانت العرب تستقسم عنده فاستقسم فخرج القدح الناهي ثم الثانية ثم الثالثة كذلك فكسر القداح وضرب بها وجه ذي الخلصة وقال عضضت بأير أبيك لو كان أبوك المقتول لما عوقنتي.

**Al-Kalbi reported that Imru’ al-Qays advanced with his banners flying intending to battle Banu Asad after they had killed his father and passed by Tabala. There was the shrine of Dhul-Khalasa, an idol at which the Arabs would seek divine support. Imru’ al-Qays asked for prophecy and the arrow for negation came out. This then happened a second and a third time. At that he broke the arrows and struck them against the face of Dhal-Khalasa, exclaiming: “You’d bite your father’s penis! If your father were the man murdered, you’d not impede me!” He then launched a raid against Banu Asad and engaged them in swift battle.<sup>23</sup>**

This example is important for multiple reasons:

- a) It is from pre-Islamic times and shows the usage of the expression with the Arabs.

<sup>22</sup> At-Tabari, Ibn Jareer, *The History of al-Tabari, volume XVII – The First Civil War*, 41

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Katheer, *as-Sirat an-Nabawiyyah - The Life of the Prophet*, Vol.1, 85

- b) Imra' al-Qays, the one who used it, was an authority in Arabic language and literature.
- c) He used it for his idol to show his anger and frustration. This makes the proverbial sense of the phrase evident.
- d) Even when he used more explicit word instead of a euphemism, it cannot be considered vulgar and obscene speech due to the context; how can then the same phrase without involving explicit words be considered vulgar and obscene?

## 6. Explicit statements in the Bible

Missionaries who zealously criticize Islam often do not remember to first have a look at their own house on the same accounts. The Bible has statements that can be viewed as gross and unimaginable. For instance, Ezekiel 23 is full of explicit content:

**“When she carried on her prostitution openly and exposed her naked body, I turned away from her in disgust, just as I had turned away from her sister. Yet she became more and more promiscuous as she recalled the days of her youth, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. There she lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses. So you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when in Egypt your bosom was caressed and your young breasts fondled.”**<sup>24</sup>

There are many more explicit stories in the Bible.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Summary and conclusion

- a) The hadith condemns party-spirit and tribal pride that undermines the very essence of Islamic spirit.
- b) The word under scrutiny implies “sticking to” or “reflecting upon.”
- c) The explicit word for the male genital organ is not mentioned. Instead a euphemism is used.
- d) The idea is to make one reflect on his origins and give up false pride. Reference to one's father is to make one realize how insignificant the person was once. Specifically, for early Muslims, it was a call to realize that their ancestors were pagans and evildoers and it makes no sense to take pride in the condemned.
- e) Caliph ‘Umar reiterated and followed this instruction by suspending monetary privileges of those making the forbidden call. This highlights the true spirit of the saying.
- f) Usage by other people in other contexts also shows it was a proverbial phrase used to condemn unbecoming behavior of a person or even simply to express anger. In the hadith under consideration, it was meant as a strong and explicit reminder to make one get over phony pride.
- g) In the light of the explanation above the correct meaning of the hadith is:

**“He, who asserts his relationship in the manners of the time of ignorance, put him to shame by explicitly mentioning to him his origins and reality as a human and the disbelief and practices of his ancestors.”**

<sup>24</sup> The Bible, NIV, Ezekiel 23:18:21

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah, “[29 Sexually Explicit, Profane and Dirty Stories and Verses in the Bible](#)”

**Bibliography**

1. Abdullah, "29 Sexually Explicit, Profane and Dirty Stories and Verses in the Bible," <http://callingchristians.com/2011/12/23/29-sexually-explicit-profane-and-dirty-stories-and-verses-in-the-bible>
2. al-Albani, Nasir ad-Deen, *Sahih Sunan Abu Dawood*, (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'arif, 1998)
3. al-Baghawi, Ibn al-Fara', *Sharh as-Sunnah* (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1983)
4. al-Fayyumi, Abul-'Abbas, *al-Misbah al-Muneer* (Beirut: Maktabah al-'Ilmiyah)
5. Flury, Peter (Munich), "Euphemism," <http://brillonline.nl/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/euphemism-e405540>
6. Horovitz, Josef, "'Uyun al-Akhbar," *Islamic Culture, The Hyderabad Quarterly Review* (Hyderabad-Deccan, 1930)
7. Ibn Abi Shaybah, *al-Musannaf* (Beirut: Dar Qurtuba, 2006)
8. Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad, *al-Musnad*, (Beirut: ar-Resalah Publications, 2001)
9. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zaad al-Ma'ad fee Hady Khayr al-'Ibad* (Beirut: ar-Risalah Publications, 1994)
10. Ibn as-Sani, *'Amal al-Yawm wal-Laylah* (Beirut: Dar al-Arqam bin Abi al-Arqam, 1998)
11. Ibn Katheer, Abul-Fida 'Imad ad-Deen, *as-Sira an-Nabawiyyah - The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, Translated by Trevor Le Gassick (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2006)
12. al-Jazari, Ibn al-Atheer, *al-Nihayah fee Ghareeb al-Hadith* (Beirut: Maktabah al-Ilmiyah, 1979)
13. Lane, E. W., *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968)
14. al-Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, *Bihar al-Anwar*, [http://shiaonlinelibrary.com/88\\_الكتب/1463\\_بحار-الأنوار-العلامة-المجلسي-ج-32/الصفحة](http://shiaonlinelibrary.com/88_الكتب/1463_بحار-الأنوار-العلامة-المجلسي-ج-32/الصفحة)
15. an-Nasa'i, Ahmad bin 'Ali, *Sunan al-Kubra* (Beirut: ar-Risalah Publications, 2001)
16. al-Qari, Mulla Ali, *Mirqat al-Mafatih* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2002)
17. Robson, James, *Mishkat al-Masabih - English Translation with Explanatory Notes* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers, Booksellers & Exporters, 1994)
18. as-Sajistani, Abu Dawood, *as-Sunan*, Translated by Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Maktabah Dar-us-Salam, 2008)
19. at-Tabari, Ibn Jareer, *The History of al-Tabari, volume XVII - The First Civil War*, Translated by G.R. Hawting (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996)
20. at-Tahawi, Abu Ja'far, *Sharh Mushkil al-Athar*, (Beirut: ar-Resalah Publications, 1994)
21. Wikitionary, "Membrum," <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/membrum>